



SERMON RESOURCE FOR SHLUCHIM

שמיני / SHMINI

DRINKING, MARRIAGE, AND STAYING SPIRITUALLY GROUNDED

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SERMON TITLE:

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A PROJECT OF THE SHLUCHIM OFFICE

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In loving memory of

ר' מנחם זאב בן פנחס ז"ל
Emil W. Herman אה who loved and supported Torah learning.



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A colleague of mine recently hosted a unique Holocaust survivor at his Chabad center: The youngest survivor of "Schindler's List." In his presentation, the survivor related how towards the end of WWII, before Oskar Schindler abandoned his factory, he ordered that a bottle of vodka be given to each Jewish worker. The survivor explained that Schindler never intended for anyone to drink them, but rather, they were to serve as vitally important commodities to be traded for the basic food items necessary to survive in those days.

Generally, Jews are not drinkers —Jews love to eat, but drinking is not our thing.

In this week's Torah portion, we read about the dedication of the Mishkan. After half a year of preparations during which the Mishkan was constructed down to its smallest details, the dedication ceremony was finally held and the joy was complete. And then, we read about a horrible tragedy in the Torah: Two of Aron's sons, Nadav and Avihu, each took their fire-pans and entered the Holy of Holies to offer

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incense—and the tragedy immediately occurred. Some kind of supernatural fire burst forth and consumed them, and they instantly perished.

Now, what exactly happened? How could they suddenly bring to G-d “a strange fire that they had not been ordered to?”

According to Rashi (Vayikra 9:2), they entered the sanctuary while drunk. Simply put, there was a huge celebration in honor of the Mishkan dedication at which they had said “l’chaim” a few times, followed by yet a few more. At that point, they went into a passionate trance of love for G-d and decided that they were interested in being closer to Him, and so they boldly broke the rules and entered the Holy of Holies.

In other words, the whole thing happened because of saying l’chaim too much.

We find a similar story in the Gemara related to Purim. The Gemara tells us how two Sages, Rabbah and Rav Zeira, sat down together for the Purim feast, and drank one l’chaim after the other until they entered some kind of spiritual trance—a result of which Rav Zeira died.

The next morning, when Rabbah had sobered up, he remembered everything—and everything that he had caused to Rav Zeira. So he prayed for him, and Rav Zeira miraculously was revived.



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The next year, Rabbah invited Rav Zeira to join him once again at the Purim feast. This time, however, Rav Zeira declined, saying that miracles don't happen every day.

We see from this that exaggerated consumption of alcohol can bring out grim results, such as the deaths of Aaron's sons or the passing of Rav Zeira. But we don't really need proof that drinking is a serious issue—everyone knows and appreciates it; it's self-understood.

Nevertheless, there are two days in the Jewish calendar in which we drink to the point of intoxication: The Talmud tells us that "one must become 'intoxicated' on Purim," and on Simchas Torah we are "accustomed" to drink.

However, if alcohol is a drug, why is it permitted not once but twice a year? And not only that—we're even instructed to consume strong drinks?

Everyone's heard of the Sages' saying (Talmud, Tractate Eruvin 65), "when wine goes in, secrets come out." That means that when a person drinks, he reveals secrets that he would not disclose on an ordinary day—sometimes even talking about things that he himself doesn't recall knowing about.

Every Jew keeps a secret, the secret of the soul—the essential point of Jewishness lodged deep within every Jew, even the most distant, unaffiliated Jew.



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This point of Jewishness will ultimately bring the Jew back to the straight path of Judaism, not allowing him to forget the rock he's chiseled from.

The problem is that this "secret" is a secret many Jews themselves don't know exists. This secret is constantly being covered in the dust of day-to-day life. By nature, a person wants material and physical things that obscure that essential point of Jewishness.

Aside from that, this secret is also concealed by the many layers of the mind. A person may be embarrassed to do a particular mitzvah because he's concerned that people might say he's suddenly become religious, or he's afraid of his mother-in-law, or family members, or friends and acquaintances.

So we say "I'chaim!" and drink—to remove and tear down the superficial barriers that limit the person. And then the true "secret" bursts forth and is revealed—the "secret" that the Jew does not want to be apart from G-d and is interested in being close to Him.

That's why twice yearly, on Purim and Simchas Torah (roughly every six months), there is the custom among Jewish people to drink and yes, get a little drunk—to break through the limits to reveal the "secret", and to connect to the true self hidden in the heart of every Jew: To discover who one really is. It is this that gives the Jew



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the strength in daily life to overpower and rise above his or her limits and inhibitions.

But even this should be done in controlled circumstances:

1. A Jew must never drink alone but rather, with other Jews sitting around the table
2. Drinking is done in a very limited time frame and on Purim and Simchas Torah which are times of mitzvah joy, not whenever one has the chance to drink.

And there is yet another essential and meaningful condition on top of all that. The Midrash tells us that one of the reasons Aron's sons died is because "they did not have wives."

Now, the Midrash is not trying to be funny. The Midrash tells us that Aron's two sons were fine young men the likes of which could not be found in Israel, and that "many women sat waiting for them"—but they felt that no proposal was good enough for them. And that was the problem.

Why? The Sages say that "fear absorbs strong wine." When a person is drunk and suddenly is terribly frightened, he sobers up much quicker. Those of us who are married, thank G-d, know that the moment we think that our wives will see us drunk



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and think what might be her reaction, we immediately sober up—which is why the married drinker won't go that far in the first place.

Nadav and Avihu did not have wives, and therefore they didn't have the sense of a commitment to life and the sense of responsibility that every married man has. That's why they succumbed to the great spiritual arousal that ultimately claimed their lives.

In like manner we can say that this was the reason for Rav Zeira's fate (as far as my research goes, Rav Zeira was not married). So it's reasonable to claim that this was the reason he went into such a state of ecstasy from which he couldn't escape.

But for married men, who have that healthy fear of their wives all year 'round, it's okay to say "l'chaim!" from time to time.